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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000347

SIPDIS

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P FOR DRUSSELL, RRANGASWAMY  
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SUBJECT: LEBANON: SHIA FAMILIES READY TO TAKE ON HIZBALLAH  
IN BAALBECK

REF: 08 BEIRUT 1389

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Duraïd Yaghi, a prominent Shia from Baalbeck and second-in-command in Walid Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party, praised President Obama's March 20 message to Iran, believing it would corner the extremists into a dialogue with the United States. He expressed his readiness to run against Hizballah with fellow independent Shia and former parliament speaker Hussein al-Husseini. Yaghi criticized March 14 for dragging its feet in deciding whether to run a list in the Baalbeck-Hermel, a Hizballah stronghold, and selecting candidates. Looking to the 2010 municipal elections, Yaghi was confident that independent Shia could oust Hizballah from Baalbeck, in part because the Sunnis were fed up with Hizballah and would side with them, but also because the Baalbeck prominent Shia families oppose the organization. He described continued harassment by Hizballah against his family and other residents in Baalbeck. He also noted that the Doha agreement only served to strengthen Hizballah by combining Baalbeck with Hermel, an area inhabited by Syrian nationals. End summary.

PRAISES OBAMA'S  
OVERTURES TO IRAN  
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2. (C) On March 22, the Ambassador, accompanied by PolOff, met Duraïd Yaghi, an independent Shia figure from a prominent family in Baalbeck who serves as Druze leader Walid Jumblatt's number two in Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party (PSP). Yaghi praised President Obama's March 20 message to Iran, saying Obama's words were "good for the moderates and cornered the extremists." He said that moderate Iranians could now make the argument that the U.S. is open to dialogue and that it is an offer their country cannot reject. Yaghi mentioned that he and other PSP members are in contact with Iran, noting that the Iranian ambassador had recently sent a message to Jumblatt and that he (Yaghi) had been invited to Tehran for the recent Gaza Conference. Yaghi denied there were any developments between Jumblatt and

the Syrians, mentioning Syrian FM Walid Moallem in particular.

NEED MARCH 14 SUPPORT  
TO TAKE ON HIZBALLAH  
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13. (C) Yaghi said that despite Jumblatt talking with him about running in the June 7 parliamentary elections for a deputy slot in the Baalbeck-Hermel district, he did not believe the March 14 alliance had decided yet whether it would run a list, and if so, which candidates would be on it.

He fretted that March 14 leaders were not taking Baalbeck seriously, singling out majority leader Saad Hariri in particular. Yaghi complained that Saad had recently received recently three "insignificant" Shia local leaders and treated them arrogantly.

14. (C) In 2005, the opposition March 8 alliance won nine of the ten deputy slots in Baalbeck-Hermel; Hizballah won six of them. Independent and former parliament speaker Hussein Husseini won the tenth seat. Yaghi said that opponents of March 8 won 30,000 votes then and, if they gained another 15-20,000 votes in this election, it would send an important signal that an alternative to Hizballah was making progress, he argued.

15. (C) Yaghi relayed that both he and Husseini were angry at what they perceive to be March 14 dragging its feet on Baalbeck. He said that it would be a bad decision if March 14 chose not to run a list in Baalbeck to avoid provoking Hizballah. (Note: Some analysts believe Saad may

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intentionally not run lists in Hizballah strongholds as part of an "understanding" whereby Hizballah also refrains from running lists in March 14 areas. End note.)

16. (C) A frustrated yet hopeful Yaghi explained that both he and Husseini had been trying to meet with Saad for some time.

He said he would wait until April 1 before deciding whether he would run. (Note: April 7 is the deadline for registering as a candidate. End note.) Yaghi proposed that he run on a list with Husseini, former MP Ali Jafar's son, three other Shia from Baalbeck, and one from Hermel. According to Yaghi, if Husseini won, he would challenge Nabih Berri to regain the speaker position he held 1984-92.

17. (C) Beyond Baalbeck, Yaghi said Jumblatt was attempting to negotiate with sometime rival Druze Minister Talal Arslan on seats in Baabda and Aley, and with Berri regarding seats in Marjeyoun-Hasbaya and West Bekaa.

LOOKING AHEAD TO 2010  
MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS  
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18. (C) Yaghi relayed that he is intent on ridding the Baalbeck municipality of Hizballah, saying it was possible to fight Hizballah in the city, but not the villages. If independent Shia start now, he continued, they could win in the 2010 municipal elections. Residents in Baalbeck, especially the Sunni population, are frustrated, he shared, because Hizballah receives and controls all of the food and aid allocated to the region.

"IN BAALBECK, WE  
KILL HIZBALLAH!"  
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19. (C) Yaghi, whose home in Baalbeck was firebombed by Hizballah during the May 2008 clashes, said that Hizballah continues to harass him and his family members. He relayed that when Hizballah members scuffled with his cousin in April, his cousin shot and killed a Hizballah instigator (who, coincidentally according to Yaghi, was one of the individuals firebombing Yaghi's house last May, the cousin in

now in hiding). "Baalbeck is different from southern Lebanon," Yaghi mused as he tucked his hand in his waistband, "In Baalbeck, we kill Hizballah!"

#### ALL ROADS LEAD TO DAMASCUS

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¶10. (C) Describing the layout of his home district, Yaghi remarked on the enormity of the area ("28 percent of Lebanese territory") and said that 18 villages are accessed from Syria because the road system to the schools and hospitals run across the border through Syria. To reach Tfail from Baalbeck, he illustrated, one actually has to first drive well into Syrian territory. He added that 10,000 residents of the district are Syrian nationals.

¶11. (C) Because of the closeness to Syria there are 30,000 votes that go directly to Hizballah, he reasoned. He criticized the Doha agreement reached in May 2008 for grouping Baalbeck and Hermel, enlarging the district's population enough to provide Hizballah an additional 40,000 votes. He estimated the Syrians would bus 10,000 voters to the polling booths on June 7.

#### BIG FAMILIES OPPOSE HIZBALLAH

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¶12. (C) Affirming that Hizballah encourages hashish and opium production in Baalbeck, Yaghi pointed out the contradiction that the two family names associated with much of the production, the Jafars and the Zoayters (related to Industry Minister Ghazi Zoayter), do not support Hizballah and are angry with the organization for taking power away from them. He reasoned that Hizballah is defeatable because the large

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families oppose it.

¶13. (C) Yaghi said that the state's presence, namely the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and the police, is weak in his district despite the drug problem, and that Hizballah mans its own checkpoints during the broad daylight. He also commented that many Shia in the Bekaa are frustrated that Hizballah had focused substantial aid to the South and Dahiyeh (southern Beirut) after the 2006 conflict, but had not seen Hizballah assistance in the primarily agricultural Bekaa Valley.

#### COMMENT

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¶14. (C) Yaghi has clearly come around and caught the election bug. Because of the threats against he and his family (reftel), he remained reluctant -- until recently -- to enter the parliamentary race. His potential alliance with Hussein does not detract from his position in PSP, as Jumblatt often uses Yaghi as a "go-between" in Shia areas. End comment.

SISON